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ABSTRACT

Middle age is a phase of the life cycle marked by poorly defined boundaries and declining status. Studies reveal that depression is more likely to occur during middle age than during any other phase of the life cycle. In addition, research has verified that depression occurs more commonly in women than men. A sociological analysis of factors which differentially influence men and women in middle life is presented. Factors which may account for the higher incidence of depression among middle-aged women are identified and discussed. Some suggestions are advanced for the prevention and treatment of depression in women in middle life. (Author)

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# SEX ROLES AND DEPRESSION IN MIDDLE AGE

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## THE PROBLEM

In American society, middle age is a phase of the life cycle marked by poorly defined boundaries and declining status. The term "middle age" has been applied to various periods of life which fall somewhere between youth and old age. Chronological age definitions of mid-life range broadly between the limits of 35 and 65 years. Physiologically, middle age is characterized by the onset of menopause and the gradual decline of reproductive and physical capacities. Regardless of the definition utilized or individual variations in abruptness or age of onset, the arrival of this period is seldom wholeheartedly welcomed. It is, in fact, more likely to be accompanied by depression than any other period of life.[1]

> For depressions, as for most disorders, variations with age are greater than they are with other variables. ... The generalization can be made at this time that depression is ... rare in childhood, makes its clinical appearance in adolescence, increases in young adulthood reaches its greates frequency in the middle years, and may decline somewhat in the later years of life.[2]
>
> (emphasis added)

> [Further] ... depression is more common in women than in men, whether it is the feeling of depression, neurotic depression, or depressive psychosis. Not only in morbidity surveys of depression, however, is this an invariable finding. In general health surveys such as the United States National Health Survey and the British Survey of Sickness, more illness or incapacity is found in women than in men, regardless of the case definitions of illness or disability, precision of research methods, socioeconomic status, or place of residence.[3]
>
> (emphasis added)

Why is the middle aged person more likely to become depressed? Why is this period of life more likely to be associated with depression in women than men?

A depressed person may be characterized as one exhibiting feelings of helplessness and low self-esteem as well as a sense of hopelessness and loss.[4]

> Bibring (1953) defined depression as "the emotional expression (indication) of a state of helplessness and powerlessnes of the ego." Expanding Freud's concept of intrapsychic loss in melancholia, Gaylin (1968) wrote that "depression can be precipitated by the loss or removal of anything that the individual overvalues in terms of his security." Depressed patients report that they have lost status, self-esteem, or gratifying interpersonal relationships (see Breed, 1967). In short, the depressed person sees himself as unable to cope with his present and future difficulties. Further, he believes that his present unhappy circumstances will continue indefinitely. Sarwer-Foner (1966) noted that depressed patients share a belief "...that their depressed state will continue indefinitely and never end. ... [The] patient himself is all too often unable to pinpoint or verbally present this delusion ... to the physician as psychotherapeutic material..." It is rather overwelmingly natural (i.e., ego syntonic) to his depressed state because he is unaware of any ability to cope with or change what is for him, an accepted fact ... Along with this hopelessness, one sees very clearly their helplessness. There is nothing that they can do through their own efforts to restore their inner organs, alter their own destructiveness or remedy a degraded, worthless, empty inner state, one so impoverished that they can do nothing well....
>
> The depressed patient, in other words, sees himself as suffering from an insoluble problem. Bjerg's finding (1967) that 81% of the suicide notes he stud-

> ied "seemed" to refer to the person's seeing himself as having a desire (other than suicidal) which could not, cannot, or will not be fulfilled" constitutes independent support for the "insoluble problem" formulation of depression (Beck, 1972).[5]

With this conceptualization of depression in mind, let us attempt to identify the insoluble problem of the middle-aged person. What has the middle-aged woman especially irrevocably lost?

DISCUSSION

It is commonplace to observe that America is a youth-oriented society. As a nation we admire the vitality of youth, not the wisdom of maturity. Our definitions of beauty and attractiveness are inevitably filled with references to the physical characteristics of youth. It is not surprising, therefore, if social worth and self-esteem begin to wane as we visibly begin to age and leave our youth behind us.

In addition to the loss of status associated with aging, the middle-aged person often faces the loss of a signigicant source of identity. The American family system, characterized by early childbearing and a small number of closely spaced children, creates the necessary preconditions for the role loss and distress experienced by many middle-aged parents. If a young adult has been heavily involved and deeply invested in child rearing, he or she may face not only severe role disruption but also an identity crisis in middle life.

It becomes apparent that the burden of middle age falls unequally upon the sexes. In this country, a man's social worth is primarily measured by his occupational achievement and success. Since this status typically remains stable or continues to rise until his retirement, he suffers less when his youthful appearance and children leave him. His occupation as a source of status and identity, remains to sustain him.

In contrast to the male, an adult woman's social currency and status depend heavily on the presence of a youthful and attractive appearance. A large and flourishing cosmetics industry gives evidence of an intense and earnest effort by women to maintain and enhance their physical beauty. Despite judicious and skillful utilization, cosmetics only temporarily hide the evidence of physiological decline. Eventually, every woman's youth is behind her and the value of her appearance is impaired by the evidence of aging.

An adult woman's status is also derived from her central role in the family. Since a woman's primary family role is the role of mother, it is often the basic source of her identity and self-worth. While childbearing and the care of preschool children occupy the years of her twenties, the average American mother enters her thirties facing a shrinking maternal role. She is functionally underemployed as the school and the community increasingly take on the responsibility for the socialization of

her offspring.

Traditionally defined sex roles for women clearly are increasingly disfunctional and less rewarding in middle life. While the 'ideal' mother is not necessarily a youthful person, youth is an intrinsic characteristic of the physically attractive female, that is, an essential trait of the female as beauty or sex object. The frequently tragic lives of fading beauty queens and aging sex symbols attest to the short lived social rewards that physical beauty or sexual attractiveness bring.

The widespread availability and use of contraception coupled with prolonged inflationary pressures on family income have served to sharply limit fertility in recent years. Since early entry into marriage continues to be the societal norm, the initation and completion of childbearing in the years of young adulthood remain a typical pattern. Fertility, consequently, drops off markedly a full decade before the biological capability of women to reproduce is lost. While a woman's ability to procreate does continue until the mid to late forties, childbearing declines sharply and progressively after thirty. Whether the etiology is technological or biologi cal, the end of childbearing symbolizes for many women the beginning of middle age.

Two basic sources of self-esteem, then, tend to fall away from a middle-aged woman simultaneously. Namely, both youthful appearance and the role of mother gradually erode in mid-life.

In addition, it is not uncommon for a woman to face the threat or reality of widowhood before this period draws to an end. Differences in life expectancy compound age differences of the sexes at marriage to make it highly probable that married women will spend some of their waning years as widows. The specter of this eventuality becomes apparent during middle age when more than one woman in ten witnesses the death of her husband.

A rising rate of divorce or marital separation also threatens marriage partners in middle life. Although the majority of middle-aged persons of both sexes who divorce eventually remarry, men are more likely than women to acquire new spouses. Women simply have a smaller pool of potential mates from which to choose. Not only are the mortality rates of middle-aged men higher than those of middle-aged women, but women also suffer from a double standard which permits males to marry younger females yet effectively discourages women from marrying younger men.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

It would appear that the greater the proportion of a woman's status and identity which are derived from traditional sex roles, the greater the likelihood that she will experience depression in middle life. For the traditional woman, many sources of self-esteem and identity erode or disappear entirely at mid-life.

Youthful sexuality and beauty, reproductive capacity, children, and perhaps a spouse may be irrecovably lost. Only in the disruption of prolonged unemployment or enforced early retirement brought about by rapid technological change, do some mature men confront the major role loss and identity crisis commonly faced by women in middle age.

Given the circumstances of their middle years, it is not surprising to find middle-aged women turning to resources outside of their families and personal relationships with men to find a sense of identity and self-worth. In increasing numbers, middle-aged women are moving into the world of work and higher education. And this is a logical course of action.

In an industrialized or post-industrialized society, formal educational credentials are an essential prerequisite for occupational achievement and success. Participation in the labor force promises a woman not only material rewards and status but also an additional locus for identity formation. Although women's occupations are generally less prestigeful and offer lower monetary rewards than those of men, educated women are slowly moving into higher status, traditionally male occupational fields.

One mechanism which contemporary women have adopted to cope with the inevitable changes of middle life, then, has served

to diversify their roles and sources of identity. Women whose sense of themselves and their self-worth is consequently fortified, undoubtedly reduce their susceptibility to depression in middle age.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTION AND TREATMENT

If depression is indeed a response to predictable losses which women commonly experience in middle life, then one form of prevention would be to establish family life patterns which reduce the likelihood of women experiencing specific types of loss. For example, if women routinely married younger men or postponed childbearing for a decade or two, then the likelihood of widowhood and an "empty nest" in middle age would decline.

If depression develops in middle life, therapists should encourage the examination and adoption of positive alternatives to previously valued roles and relationships. The establishment of significant roles and relationships outside those proscribed by traditional sex roles is also an important preventitive strategy. Women of all ages should be educated to anticipate the consequences of their life choices and patterns and to plan for the contingencies of their later years.

footnotes

1
For a description of the distribution of depression by age see- Charlotte Silverman, The Epidemiology of Depression, Johns Hopkins Press, 1968, pp. 78-80.

2
Silverman, p. 78.

3
Silverman, p. 73.

4
For a brief summary of the nature of depression see - Myrna Weissman and Eugene Paykel, The Depressed Woman, University of Chicago Press, 1974, pp. 3-18.

5
Aaron Beck and Ruth Greenberg, "Cognitive Therapy With Depressed Women," in Women in Therapy, Violet Franks and Vasanti Burtle (eds.), Brunner/Mazel, 1974, pp. 115-116.

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